

The Video Artist as Engineer

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The Video Engineer as Artist

by Peter Z. Grossman

Back in the late sixties, when artists first started working in video, Aldo Tambellini spent time pointing vidicon cameras at light bulbs and watching the weird effects on a monitor as the tube burned out. He even recorded a videotape of the phenomenon. Of course, technicians would have discouraged him from harming equipment with such experiments, but by playing around with his hardware Tambellini was able to create predictable effects he could use artistically.

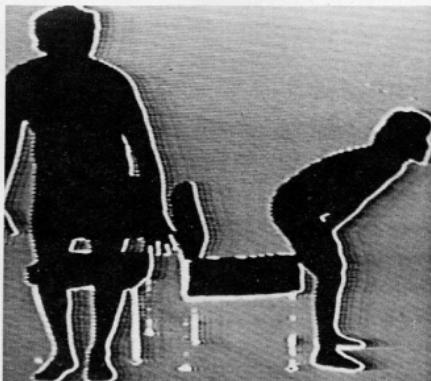
The author is a freelance writer with a special interest in video and the arts.

It was through such explorations that many of the early video works were created. At first, video artists were so obsessed with the electronic capabilities of their equipment that many of their works were little more than demonstrations of what it could do. Process became substance; medium became material; and wild, almost irrational effects were tried and shown.

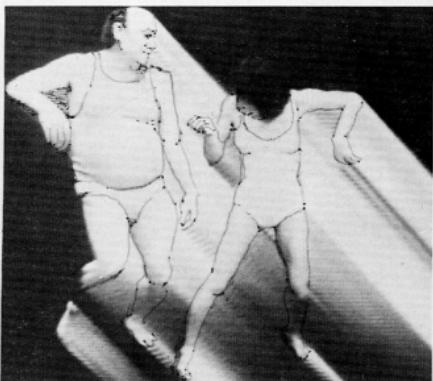
Then, gradually, as video art passed out of its infancy, the fascination with process diminished. Artists have now begun to think of video more as a tool than as a subject in itself. Just as painters create on a blank canvas, video artists now use the blank tv screen as a space on which they can

compose scenes and impressions. Video has become a medium to an end, not just an end in itself.

The video technology that they're using has also changed. It's grown incredibly sophisticated, with new advances seeming to come along every other day. The same kind of wild experimentation that might be possible with a black-and-white portapak isn't so easy to do with synthesizers and other advanced image-processing devices. First, just grasping the basic capabilities and principles can be difficult enough. More important, though, it's hard to get unlimited access to expensive, high-technology equipment, and few people get a chance to use it extensively. When



Doris Chase, an artist who always uses an array of video effects to alter and illuminate her subjects, finds that the medium is especially effective in conjunction with dance. Her "How Do You Feel?" is one of several works she has done with dancer Kei Takei, pictured



above on videotape with fellow dancer Lloyd Ritter. Chase is a firm believer in using the "magic" of video to its fullest. "I'm not interested in documentary," she says. "Rather I try to create pieces that can only work in video."

artists do get the chance, most are obliged to seek technical help to get as much out of the equipment as possible in the short time they have.

Why bother?

Some artists have in fact reached the point where they see little or no reason to learn how video technology works at all. Life, they feel, is too short, so why bother to master technology while at the same time cultivate artistic sensibilities? So they don't try. And there are a lot of technical people around—every studio and video center is bound to have a few—that artists can rely on every time they do a piece. In fact, many artists won't even consider doing anything without them.

How well should a video artist know his or her equipment? How much of an engineer does one have to be? There is no definitive answer. Some people get by knowing next to nothing while others feel they couldn't work as video artists unless they were also skilled technicians.

Of those who know and care little about video technology, many are performers who want to use the medium primarily to record their works or expand their audience via tv. Often out of fear, "they don't want to bother with the grubby technical details," says Carole Brandenberg of WNET/13's TV Lab in New York, the major organization to provide technical support for video art projects. For them, video is more of a translation mechanism than a primary



medium of creation, and they're usually content just to see their dance or dramatic pieces presented in a flattering way.

Artists who use video to compose works of "video art," on the other hand, depend on it to give form to their ideas. Trying to do that without some knowledge of the equipment is asking for frustration. An artist has to be able to understand to some extent the process involved in turning an idea into a video picture. Without that, he or she cannot know the creative limitations of the equipment and cannot measure the amount of labor and expense involved. John J. Godfrey, technical director at the WNET Lab, has often found himself in the position of having to "rescue" the

tapes of novices whose enthusiasm is out of step with reality. Foreknowledge of the medium is important, he concludes, "because it allows a person to go in with a planned attack."

Prodding the technicians

That doesn't, however, mean that the artist has to be his own engineer. (Godfrey doesn't feel that's necessarily even desirable.) Knowing just the capabilities of equipment can be sufficient. At times, artists with only a limited sense of what the equipment can do have prodded technicians to accomplish things they knew to be impossible. For instance, in 1968, when modern-dance pioneer Alwin Nikolais presented CBS with

Above: A scene from "Fitch's Feathered Bird," by Eli Noyes Jr. "I'm not an electronic engineer, but I consider it extremely important to know the principles behind the medium," says Noyes, a video artist and filmmaker. "Besides, I love technology. It's so fascinating to see how it's done. It's like learning how an oil painting is made." "Fitch's Feathered Bird" was recently shown on the PBS Videotape Review series.

Left: A scene from "Transcending," the first and only video work of filmmaker Ian Hugo. Naturally, Hugo needed technical assistance, which was provided by associate Bob Hansen and the WNET-TV Lab's John Godfrey. Hugo, who's in his 80s and has been a filmmaker for about 30 years, was intrigued with some of video's possibilities, especially those that distinguish it from film. But he also quickly became aware of video's limitations. A specialist in color and color processing on film, Hugo realized that video's color quality is not yet up to film standards. "Color processing is easily done on video," he noted, "but the colors of film are closer to what painters have made."



the idea for his effects-filled "Limbo," they told him it couldn't be done. But, even though his knowledge of the technology was minimal, Nikolais knew enough to be virtually certain they could do it, and eventually he proved his case.

But Nikolais isn't a video artist. Rather, he's a stage artist who works on occasion in video, and when he does he usually has a full studio crew. Most of those who are committed to working as video artists feel that they need a much greater knowledge of the tools. There is some disagreement though on how much and what kind of knowledge it should be. Artists' opinions vary to some extent according to the level of technology they're talking about. People at the highest levels tend to be more dependent on outside help. And they also depend on how they see the work process and the kind of role they've set for themselves within.

To take one example, Doris Chase, the sculptor and video practitioner (*Videography*, June 1978), sees herself as the creative director of her works, but she isn't her own engineer. Like many others working with the highest technological means, Chase has a technical director assist her on every tape. She also has a regular assistant in Jamie Newman, a technician by training. So Chase works not simply with an engineer but always with a team of people. She feels that what she has to know is how to talk to them. "I have to know what questions to ask," she says. "But the way

the machines do things isn't as important to me as what they actually do." Chase knows the capabilities of video equipment generally, and that, she feels, is enough. And while she doesn't have her fingers on the buttons, she guides—directs—those who do until she gets the results she wants. Doris Chase's works have appeared on WNYC-TV, New York City's municipally owned UHF station.

Be your own engineer

One of the pioneers of high-technology video art, Ed Emshwiller, also frequently seeks the help of video technicians. But unlike Chase, Emshwiller has tried to learn as much as possible about the principles behind the equipment as well as its general capabilities. He knows the how as well as the why. But he uses such vast technological resources that he sometimes finds himself a little out of his depth. "Like a composer/conductor of an orchestra, I'm not an expert pianist or clarinetist, but to create a work I may need their talents." Still, Emshwiller is the kind of artist who will practice the "clarinet" on his own to learn its complete range and color even though he knows there are virtuosos to help him. He feels that he should learn as much as he can about his equipment because it can only make him a better artist. Emshwiller may not be his own engineer but he's close to it.

Kit Fitzgerald is even closer. In fact, she tries to dispense with all outside

help as a matter of principle. Of course, she has an ongoing collaboration with technically minded John Sanborn, but even when she works with him she wants to handle the equipment physically. Likening the video process to painting, she finds a "certain exhilaration in dealing with the tools," a greater sense of association with the process and the result. The tools are, in a sense, the extension of the imagination and so she wants to grasp them, both figuratively and literally. Fitzgerald will work with an engineer when union rules demand it. (For example, studio technicians recently transferred one of her $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch tapes to two-inch tape for a PBS broadcast.) But even though she works with high-technology equipment, she feels she's reached a level of understanding and expertise that allows her to be pretty much her own engineer.

Not many artists using such advanced means are able to do as much on their own as Fitzgerald and Sanborn. However there are a number of artists using less sophisticated equipment who express the same desire for direct contact that Fitzgerald describes. Celia Ipiots, an artist who composes and dances for video, also uses the painting analogy to describe her relationship to her equipment. "You can't dictate a painting," she says. "You can dictate a picture, but you lose the intimacy, the connection with the work." She got involved in video because she found it frustrating to be simply the



In the video work "Exchange in Three Parts," two scenes from which are shown above, artists Kit Fitzgerald and Jon Sanborn juxtaposed black-and-white screen-within-the-screen images against a surrounding color image in order to explore changes in

what Fitzgerald calls "perceptions of illusion and reality." Fitzgerald and Sanborn, both expert in using video technology, did considerable image manipulation and processing for "Exchange." Typically, they did it in postproduction, not during shooting.



Pictured above is a sequence from Celia Ipiotis's "Videodance with Graphics," a work done with graphic artist Eloise Philpot. The piece, shot on half-inch black-and-white equipment, has surprised Ipiotis's fellow artists, many of whom believe it required far more technical control than was actually used. (Warren-Bob photo)

subject while someone else taped her dance works.

Ipiotis, however, has been using only half-inch black-and-white equipment, and few people limit themselves to such basic hardware for very long. The more artists do in the field, the more they seek to expand their creative reach—meaning very often higher, more complex levels of technology. To go off and hibernate with a portapak like people did in the early days of video art may be sufficient for some but it is undoubtedly limiting. There are many new and complicated machines that can be tremendously useful to the video artist. You don't have to use them, but to cut yourself off from them in the name of being your own engineer means narrowing your artistic potential, rather than expanding it. Of course it's possible to be both artist and engineer using any level of equipment, but few are willing to make the effort that requires. As a result, an artist may be forced more and more to work as part of a team. The individual's artistic vision may remain, but in today's video the artist may need help stretching out

the "canvas" and mixing the "paints." Artists are of necessity becoming more composer/conductors, and that trend is likely to become more apparent as video technology advances.

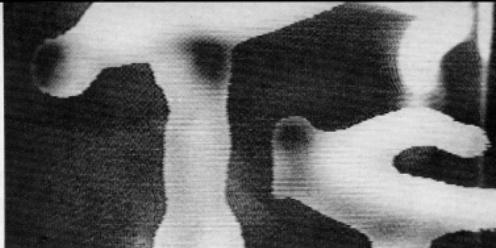
Going too far

But there is a danger of this going too far, of people justifying ignorance because they can't know everything. Even if creating video art is becoming more and more a team effort, let's hope that it will never become so compartmentalized and specialized that the mind behind the work will become detached from the process of making it. The greater an artist's grasp of the tools, the greater his or her chance of expanding the form—to keep the lifeblood of new ideas and new concepts flowing. Jeff Bush, an artist who has come to the field from the technical side, put it this way: "Not every video artist needs to know how a synch generator works or how a synthesizer works. But it can only help them. Knowing how the tool works, they may discover ways of doing things that have never been seen before."

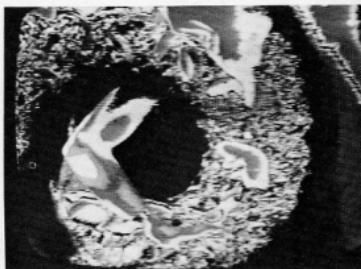
In Hermine Freed's "Art Herstory," shown below, sequences of time "have been layered into one sequence of time." Freed, who does much of her own technical work, nevertheless does not create out of simple electronic experimentation. She says: "I proceed from an idea. Technology solves the problem."



Doris Chase's work with dancer Mernie Morris, pictured above, is part of the Doris Chase Dance Series, a group of half-hour "videodance" programs. Two of the works were shown last June on WNYC-TV Channel 31 in New York City.



Ed Emshwiller's "Pilobolus and Joan," shown above, was shot in 1974. It required extraordinary technical resources, including use of the Paik-Abe video synthesizer. Video pioneer Emshwiller used numerous generations of material keyed and supered to achieve effects so subtle they must be seen more than once.



Above: Skip Sweeney's "Illuminatin' Sweeney." Sweeney is also a broadcast engineer—a rarity in the world of video art—but he doesn't necessarily consider that an advantage. Says he: "Sometimes people get too involved in electronics. They go too far, and although they can make machines and effects, they can't make tapes that people want to watch." Sweeney feels engineers and artists alike should "ride with the nature of video, and experiment freely rather than try to control everything rigidly."



Above: A video installation on a Long Island beach by Kit Fitzgerald and Jon Sanborn. Five monitors, buried up to their screens, played tapes of images of sand, pebbles and water that blended tv into the surrounding real world.